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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002089

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SUBJECT: BRV AND CATHOLIC CHURCH AT ODDS OVER CHAVEZ'
PROPOSED CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

REF: CARACAS 002050

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Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON,
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. The Venezuelan Catholic Conference of Bishop's recently-released document entitled "Called to Live in Liberty" strongly criticizes President Chavez' proposed constitutional changes. The bishops call Chavez' efforts to construct a "socialist state" discriminatory, anti-democratic, and "morally unacceptable," but do not explicitly urge parishioners to vote against the reform package in the early December referendum. President Chavez and other senior Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) officials have lashed out with personal attacks on the bishops without responding to the substance of their criticism. Opposition strategists welcomed the bishops' message and are helping disseminate it among a voting population that is nominally 90 percent Catholic. Opposition leaders also note, however, that the bishops' influence over the largely secularized Venezuelan population is limited. End Summary.

Catholic Church: Proposed Reform "Morally Unacceptable"

¶2. (SBU) The Venezuelan Catholic Conference of Bishops (CEV) issued October 19 a three-page "exhortation" to Catholic voters that categorically rejects President Chavez' proposed changes to 1999 Constitution (Reftel). Specifically, the bishops argue that Chavez' proposed constitutional changes concentrate more power in the hands of the president and "favor authoritarianism." They also note that the concept of a "socialist state" excludes opposition sectors, foments societal polarization, and runs contrary to the democratic principles of the existing Constitution. Most significantly, the bishops state that they consider Chavez' constitutional package "morally unacceptable in light of the Social Doctrine of the (Catholic) Church."

¶3. (SBU) The Catholic bishops stopped short of explicitly counseling parishioners to vote against the constitutional changes in the early December referendum. Instead, they invoked the "Holy Spirit" to assist Venezuelans in "this difficult decision." The bishops also reiterated their call for "dialogue and reconciliation" among Venezuelans, a theme that they had last stressed in their July 7 pastoral letter. A number of contacts tell us that parish priests have already

been drawing on the bishop's "exhortation" during the Sunday homilies.

BRV: Bishops "An Embarrassment"

¶4. (U) President Chavez responded quickly to the Bishops' criticism, conveying his criticism via telephone during an October 21 talk show program on government-run VTV. Chavez said Venezuela's Catholic Church leaders are "morally unacceptable for our people, our church, for Catholics, for Christians - the bishops we have embarrass us." Without addressing the substance of the bishops' criticisms, Chavez specifically accused the Church leaders of lying to their parishioners about his proposed constitutional package and aligning themselves with coup-plotting. Similarly, Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro told the local media on October 23 that the bishops "do not represent Catholics" and predicted they would be confronted with a "moral cataclysm" for taking a position "contrary to the national majority."

¶5. (U) Information Minister William Lara also told the media that the bishops should remove their Church robes when making pronouncements on political issues. Caracas Cardinal Jorge Urosa responded in the media that Church leaders should be non-partisan, but stressed that this does not mean they should be "indifferent" to social issues. Lara retorted October 24 by telling reporters that Cardinal Urosa is not impartial but on "the first line of attack against constitutional reform." He accused Urosa of "representing the interests of the rancid, discredited oligarchy."

Comment

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¶6. (C) The BRV is particularly sensitive to the bishops' criticism because the Catholic Church still enjoys considerable credibility among Venezuelans and has a nation-wide presence, including in pro-Chavez strongholds. BRV officials continue to try to discredit Catholic leaders as out of touch with their flocks. They also continue inviting pro-Chavez clergy members to government events to try to blunt the bishop's message. Opposition strategists are pleased with the Church's activism and are helping give the bishops' October 19 "exhortation" wider dissemination. At the same time, they note that although some 90 percent of Venezuelans are nominally Catholic, most Venezuelans do not regularly go to church and are not easily led by Church guidance. The bishops notably ducked the tactical issue that plagues the opposition: whether or not to participate or abstain in the early December referendum.

FRENCH